Some Old-Time Song-Solos for the Banjo and their Story.

By G. A. Keeler.

Quaint woodcut from the book of words of the play "OBI, or Three Finger'd Jack," produced at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, and at Drury Lane Theatre, in A.D. 1800, showing banjos in the foreground of the scene depicted on the stage.

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A while ago, when writing a series of articles on "Some Banjo Songs and Their Story," I referred to certain solos that incorporated what are termed "variations." At the same time I explained what was meant by the term "variations." A "song-solo" is a solo arranged from a song—a device or practice that is very popular.

Solos with variations were much liked by many of the old-time banjoists, and usually such solos were based on popular airs or songs, "Home, Sweet Home" being especially favoured, but a few solos with variations can be mentioned where the variations are founded on an *original* theme, for instance, Harry Turner's very fine "Air in C Major, with Variations."

In this brochure I purpose to discuss briefly, several familiar songs, some of them well described as "banjo songs," because they were not only early arranged for the banjo but actually contain a reference to the instrument. "A song," wrote a newspaper leader-writer quite recently, "is a recognised cure for the 'blues.' As far back as history relates, men have been singing to keep their hearts up, singing to drive their cares away; and the musicians, who have been devising these ditties through the ages, have made more lasting places for themselves in human memory than a great many of the more spectacular figures. War, naturally enough, is a fertile time for music; for it is in time of war that men's spirits swell to their highest point or reach their lowest ebb. The present conflict, like every other, has brought forth its crop of songs; but so far they have been but poor empty things beside the heart-rousing ballads of twenty-five years ago." In view of the paucity of new solos for the banjo, due to the war, it is of certain old-time heart-rousing songs,* formerly arranged as solos for the banjo, that I propose to consider now, as they are well worth study (more particularly, of course, by "finger-style" players), during the enforced "black-out." In my own case such study has helped to dispel "black-out blues."

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* The earliest known literary reference to the banjo occurs in Sir Han Sloane's rare book *A Journey to Jamaica*, written in A.D. 1683 (but not published until 1707), and the earliest mention of the instrument in connection with the drama is contained in the "Grand Pantomimical Drama called '*OBI' or Three Finger'd Jack*," by Dr. Samuel Arnold, where, in the Second Act, Jack sings to the words "Bange lara banga bossi Bange lara banga bossi." "Mrs. Mountain," in the same Act has a song, verse two of which runs:—

> Mandingo King oh! his heart was glad
> He call his loving subjects round
> And say "look here be dear Daughter found
> Go dance to the *Banga* just like mad."

The play, of which I have a copy of the original printed music, was produced at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, in 1800, and incorporated selections of music from "Dr. Haydn"—the great musician (1732-1809). The text of the play included illustrations of banjos on the stage.—G.A.K.

"POOR MARY ANN."

One of the earliest arrangers of solos with variations was James Bohee, famous in the 1890s for his remarkably advanced arrangement, for those days, of "Home, Sweet Home"—a selection in which he introduced the tremolo movement with thumb accompaniment. Another skilful arranger was W. E. Ballantine. I have before me at the moment his arrangement of "Poor Mary Ann." It appeared in No. 6 of his "Banjo Gems" somewhere about the 1890s, and was written for the six or seven stringed banjo, the banjo then mostly in use. Ballantine described himself as "England's Premier Classical Banjoist" and he instructed many of the royalty of those days who essayed the study of the banjo. In his variations to the main theme, Ballantine made great use of triplets.

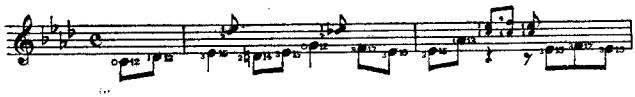
"ALICE, WHERE ART THOU?"

The next interesting song or ballad I should like to mention is J. Ascher's "Alice, Where Art Thou?" That wonderfully clever player, Alfred A. Farland, made a fine arrangement of it in the so-called American notation, and Albert Lyles—himself a tuneful composer and skilled player—transcribed it into the C notation, as we here in England term it. Variation I is in the form of florid arpeggio passages, and Variation II is in the tremolo, mainly on the third and fourth strings. Arthur Stanley also arranged this ballad for *tremolo with plectrum*, the second banjo part being written in the usual style for fingers. An arrangement of "Alice, Where Art Thou?" appears in Mr. Zarh Myron Bickford's album "The Banjo Players' Favorite for Banjo in C Notation," where, in bars 24 to 28, 32, and 35 to 37, tremolo with thumb accompaniment occurs.

"MY OLD KENTUCKY HOME."

To come now to three famous American songs, the first melody to be mentioned is "My Old Kentucky Home" (Foster). There are several notable arrangements of this, one by W. H. Plumbridge, made in 1904, and the other by A. H. Nassau-Kennedy, in 1906. Plumbridge's arrangement, like most other song-solos with variations, follows the usual lay-out of Intro (Andante); Theme proper; and Variations I, II, III and IV. An interlude occurs and is used to facilitate a change of key. Variation III is in harmonics and Variation IV is a clever tremolo with thumb accompaniment. Kennedy's arrangement of "My Old Kentucky Home" is interesting, not only on account of the eminence and manipulative ability of this arranger, but because, for Variation II he adopted waltz time, and furthermore the whole solo and subsequent variations have to be played with the bass raised to D. Mr. Bickford, in his arrangement, introduces harmonics in the fourth and eighth bars and also in the last bar.

"LISTEN TO THE MOCKING BIRD."

The most ambitious arrangement of "Listen to the Mocking Bird" is that made by Parke Hunter. The song itself was written by Alice Hawthorne (Sep. Winner). Parke Hunter followed the usual scheme of Intro (Andante); air or theme; then follow the Variations and a "supplement" (described as an "Extra Variation"). This last-mentioned variation is in the key of A flat and the first few bars are as follows:—

The notes with stems pointing down followed by figures are Right Hand Harmonics (executed by stopping the string with the first finger and picking it with the thumb). H. J. Ellis, Z. M. Bickford and Harry Sykes also arranged the "Mocking Bird." The arrangement by Sykes was published by express permission of S. S. Stewart (composer of the celebrated "Wayfarer's Waltz"). Variation II is a somewhat unusual arrangement, i.e.:—

Parke Hunter's arrangement and Bickford's setting are very similar to each other as regards the actual theme, in fact they may be considered almost identical except that the grace notes incorporated therein—effective enough in each instance—differ interestingly in the respective arrangements.

"DARLING NELLY GRAY."

I have left a very great favourite, to wit, "Darling Nelly Gray," until the last because, at the same time, I wanted to give a few biographical particulars of its composer, Benjamin Russell Hanby. The details of Foster's life are so well known, especially after the recent film shown at numerous cinemas, that it would have been a work of supererogation to repeat them. But the composer of "Darling Nelly Gray" stands in a slightly different category. His great song, described as "a popular minstrel melody," was arranged by Geo. L. Lansing as a song-solo with variations. It is the only important arrangement I know. It follows the usual plan adopted by most arrangers. Variation I is built up on the idea of repeated notes, and Variation II is marked "tremolo *ad lib*," the second portion being extremly effective. H. J. Ellis arranged the song, with banjo accompaniment, in the key of D—a good and sound accompaniment or tonal scheme that well backed up the voice part.

Benjamin R. Hanby was born in Rushville, Fairfield County, Ohio, on the 22nd July, 1833. He died 16th March, 1867, at the age of 34 and is buried at Westerville. The old home at the edge of the village of Rushville has long since disappeared. He was the eldest son of Bishop William Hanby, of the United Brethren Church, an ardent abolitionist. As the children grew up Bishop Hanby moved to Westerville for better school facilities. Hanby entered Otterbein College at the age of 16. He is said to have received his inspiration for the song from a newspaper account of a slave auction in Kentucky, where a slave, Nellie Gray, was torn from the arms of her betrothed and sold for $750 to a Georgia plantation owner. Hanby composed the song in 1855 and sent it to a large music publishing house which copyrighted it on 17th June, 1856. The song instantaneously became a "best seller" and was powerful ammunition for the Abolitionists. One critic wrote: "This lyric swayed the sentiment of our people perhaps more than the oft-quoted *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for a book must be read from cover to cover, but a song leaps from heart to heart." The *Literary Digest* listed it as one of eight American songs that have survived more than two generations and are still favourites. At Otterbein College, Hanby studied for the ministry. Following his graduation there he married Miss Kate Winter. He taught at various schools and later entered the ministry and held a pulpit at Lewisburg, Ohio, which he gave up in order to devote all his time to music. He was for some period with the John Church Co., of Cincinatti, and subsequently became an associate of Root and Cady, of Chicago, collaborating with Geo. F. Root, the well-known music publisher, on two song books, "Forest Choir" and "Chapel Gems." Hanby wrote about sixty hymns and other songs for Sunday schools and public schools. Outstanding among his other songs were "Little Tillies' Grave," "Ole Shady," "Now Den! Now Den!" "The Nameless Heroine," and "Weaver John." Hanby's widow survived him by 65 years, dying in 1932, at the age of 99.

A SHRINE TO "DARLING NELLY GRAY."

An abandoned, dilapidated, century-old house, for many years an eyesore on a pretty street in Westerville, Ohio, was recently restored and dedicated as one of Ohio's outstanding shrines. It is the home where Hanby wrote his best-remembered song. One of the most enthusiastic backers of the memorial to the composer is Mrs. Dacia Custer-Shoemaker, a native of Westerville. She was brought into the world by Dr. William Hanby, brother of the composer. She purchased the home and turned it over to the trusteeship of the Ohio Archæological and Historical Society. She also purchased the site for the caretaker's residence. Every available bit of information necessary to reconstruct all the architectural details of the home as they were when Hanby evolved the song has been obtained. Mrs. Shoemaker is related to General Custer who was massacred by the Indians. When the Westerville citizens began their movement to preserve the home as a memorial to Hanby they found an enthusiastic booster, named W. H. Fouse, son of an ex-slave, Squire Fouse, who at one time owned the old house. W. H. Fouse, a school superintendent, had always been impressed by

the historical significance of the home in which he lived as a boy and as a result of this interest he inaugurated a campaign among the negro school children of the South to raise funds, and hundreds of those children donated pennies.

Besides being significant as the place where "Darling Nellie Gray" was composed, the home is interesting as a link in the famed "Underground Railroad" by which thousands of escaped slaves were hurried to the Canadian border and gained their freedom. Bishop Hanby's trusted ally in sheltering these refugees, according to a brochure issued by the Hanby Memorial Association, was his son, Benjamin, "who kept watch, who ministered to the fugitives, and at night led them from their hiding-place into the house to kneel with the family in worship and to receive the bishop's evening benediction. And it was the confidence reposed in him and the scenes witnessed here which most profoundly touched the boy's sympathies and sowed the seeds which eventually flowered in the loveliness and pathos of this immortal song."

Much more could be recorded of this laudable project to commemorate the composer, but I think I have written enough to show that, of all song-solos arranged for the banjo,* in the way already outlined in these pages, "Darling Nelly Gray" is one whose story is invested with considerable interest and well worth study by all finger-style banjo players.

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* Most of the compositions here considered are probably out of print, but it is possible that some players who read these lines will have a copy of one or more of them in their collection of banjo music.—G. A. K.

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